



Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Summary

Full Book Summary

The anonymous narrator of *Notes from Underground* is a bitter, misanthropic man living alone in St. Petersburg, Russia, in the 1860s. He is a veteran of the Russian civil service who has recently

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been able to retire because he has inherited some money. The novel consists of the "notes" that the man writes, a confused and often contradictory set of memoirs or confessions describing and explaining his alienation from modern society.

Notes from Underground is divided into two sections. The first, "Underground," is shorter and set in the 1860s, when the Underground Man is forty years old. This section serves as an introduction to the character of the Underground Man, explaining his theories about his antagonistic position toward society.

The first words we hear from the Underground Man tell us that he is "a sick man . . . a wicked man . . . an unattractive man" whose self-loathing and spite has crippled and corrupted him. He is a well-read and highly intelligent man, and he believes that this fact accounts for his misery. The Underground Man explains that, in modern society, all conscious and educated men should be as miserable as he is. He has become disillusioned with all philosophy. He has appreciation for the sublime, Romantic idea of "the beautiful and lofty," but he is aware of its absurdity in the context of his narrow, mundane existence.

The Underground Man has great contempt for nineteenth-century utilitarianism, a school of thought that attempted to use mathematical formulas and logical proofs to align man's desires with his best interests. The Underground Man complains that man's primary desire is to exercise his free will, whether or not it is in his best interests. In the face of utilitarianism, man will do nasty and unproductive things simply to prove that his free will is unpredictable and therefore completely free. This assertion partially explains the Underground Man's insistence that he takes

pleasure in his own toothaches or liver pains: such pleasure in pain is a way of spiting the comfortable predictability of life in modern society, which accepts without question the value of going to the doctor. The Underground Man is not proud of all this useless behavior, however. He has enormous contempt for himself as a human being. He is aware that he is so overcome by inertia that he cannot even become wicked enough to be a scoundrel, or insignificant enough to be an insect, or lazy enough to be a true lazybones.

The second fragment of *Notes from Underground*, entitled "Apropos of the Wet Snow," describes specific events in the Underground Man's life in the 1840s, when he was twenty-four years old. In a sense, this section serves as a practical illustration of the more abstract ideas the Underground Man sets forth in the first section. This second section reveals the narrator's progression from his youthful perspective, influenced by Romanticism and ideals of "the beautiful and lofty," to his mature perspective in 1860, which is purely cynical about beauty, loftiness, and literariness in general.

"Apropos of the Wet Snow" describes interactions between the Underground Man and various people who inhabit his world: soldiers, former schoolmates, and prostitutes. The Underground Man is so alienated from these people that he is completely incapable of normal interaction with them. He treats them with a mixture of disgust and fear that results in his own effacement or humiliation—which in turn result in remorse and self-loathing.



The Underground Man's alienation manifests itself in all kinds of relationships. When walking in the park, he obsesses about whether to yield the right of way to a soldier whom he does not even know. Then, in a confused attempt at social interaction, the Underground Man deliberately follows some school acquaintances to a dinner where he is not wanted, alternately insulting them openly and craving their attention and friendship. Later that same evening, the Underground Man attempts to rescue an attractive young prostitute named Liza by delivering impassioned, sentimental speeches about the terrible fate that awaits her if she continues to sell her body.

When Liza comes to visit the Underground Man in his shoddy apartment several days later, he reacts with shame and anger when he realizes she has reason to pity or look down upon him. The Underground Man continues to insult Liza throughout the visit. Hurt and confused, she leaves him alone in his apartment.

Here the Underground Man decides to end his notes. In a footnote at the end of the novel, Dostoevsky reveals that the Underground Man fails to make even this simple decision to stop writing, as Dostoevsky says that the manuscript of the notes goes on for many pages beyond the point at which he has chosen to cut it off.

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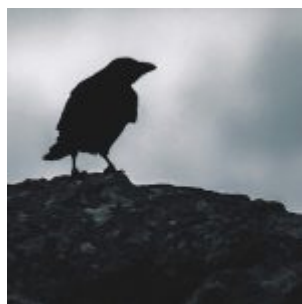
Part II, Chapter X

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Key Facts



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Quick Quiz

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Lyric or a Quote by Edgar
Allan Poe?

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Character List

CHARACTERS



The Underground Man: Character Analysis

CHARACTERS



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FURTHER STUDY

Take a Study Break



QUIZ: Is This a Taylor Swift Lyric or a Quote by Edgar Allan Poe?



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